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RUEHSO/AMCONSUL SAO PAULO 1276  
RUEHRI/AMCONSUL RIO DE JANEIRO 5527  
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5152  
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 7124  
RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 6433  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 0029  
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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT STEPS DOWN -- FINALLY

REFS: A) BRASILIA 1745; B) BRASILIA 1991

¶1. (SBU) Senator Renan Calheiros (PMDB, Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, government coalition; of Alagoas) resigned as Senate President on December 4 after facing months of mounting accusations of ethics violations. His resignation was an apparent quid pro quo with his fellow Senators in exchange for acquittal, allowing him to keep his Senate seat. Shortly after resigning, Calheiros survived a plenary vote by 48-29 on a second set of ethics charges. In mid-September he survived a similar vote (ref a).

¶2. (SBU) Calheiros took leave from the presidency in October (ref b) after surviving a plenary vote on whether to remove him from the Senate and ban him from politics for eight years. He still faces votes on several other ethics charges, and a conviction on any one would result in the loss of his Senate seat and political rights.

¶3. (SBU) According to customary Senate practice the presidency belongs to the largest party, currently the PMDB, with 20 seats. Jockeying for succession started long ago, and while many names have emerged in the media as possible successors, there is still no consensus candidate. Many names from the PMDB's 20-senator delegation have been suggested in the media, only to disappear because the individual was unacceptable to the opposition, is under federal investigation for malfeasance and did not want to come under public scrutiny (two such cases), did not want the job (former president Jose Sarney), or was unacceptable to the government side. As a result, the solution may be the lowest common denominator, an uncontroversial figure acceptable to many but truly satisfactory to few. The front runner appears to be Senator Garibaldi Alves Filho (PMDB-Rio Grande do Norte), who is not especially known for leadership qualities but has actively campaigned for the job.

¶4. (SBU) Opposition politicians and many opinion leaders had hoped for a conviction to redeem the Senate's tarnished image and restore some public confidence in the national Congress. With Calheiros's resignation from the Presidency and another acquittal under his belt, it's a draw between the political forces: Calheiros and the PMDB are spared the disgrace of his removal from the Senate, while opposition Senators are pleased to see him out of the Presidency, but will continue to try to get him removed from office on the many remaining ethics charges. The Calheiros case is now assured to drag on into next February or March.

CHICOLA